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### The Covenant Presence of God Retracted, Part 5

William Cowper, a solid Christian of the eighteenth century, wrote the hymn, *Sometimes a Light Surprises*. (Commissions, 1990, p. Hymn 621) This hymn was written because of the severe struggle he had as Christian, for he struggled with great bouts of depression. There is no doubt that this hymn was inspired by Psalm 40:3 which speaks of God in the course of sanctification “putting a new song in our mouth,” Cowper wrote:

Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings [while he lives out his Christian

life]; it is the Lord, who rises with healing in his wings: when comforts are declining, He grants the soul again a season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain. (Ten quoting from Habakkuk 3...)

Though vine nor fig tree neither their wonted fruit shall bear, though all the field should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there; yet God the same abideth, His praise shall tune my voice, for, while in Him confiding, I cannot but rejoice. (Commissions, 1990, p. Hymn 621)

One of the practical benefits that comes from a saving relationship with Christ is that trial and difficulty become a portal of hope by which the child of God may enter into a deep and abiding relationship with the Lord. This we have seen is the first word of comfort Ezekiel gave in the text before us to the servant of God entering into a dark night of the soul!

This no doubt was many an Israelite in 586 BC when their nation was destroyed, their temple burnt, and their entire world was turned upside down as they were brought in chains by the Babylonians into exile! Recall, this was NOT because God somehow had forgotten about them, NO! The exile was according to the Divine will of our loving God as He disciplined His people because of their rebellion (Ezekiel 11:16).

Hebrews 12:7-8, "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

This discipline can take the form of God removing the sense of His presence from us by which we *feel* bereft of the Lord and so joyless, agitated in our walks, even depressed; this is what we mean by the loss of God's Covenant Presence. Yet, at times like these, it is imperative that the child of God understands that the Lord is nearer to them than when they were strong and robust in their walks.

Psalms 3:34b, "...[God] gives grace to the afflicted."

And what does that look like?

Psalms 34:17-18, "*The righteous cry and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*"

As we began considering the compassion that God gives to the downcast, needy Christian we found that God gives grace to help in the time of need. The first grace God provided was a rich and abiding relationship with the Lord.

Ezekiel 11:16, "Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Though I had removed them far

away among the nations, and though I had scattered them among the countries, yet I was a sanctuary for them a little while in the countries where they had gone.””

When God’s people left Jerusalem in chains, traversed the hard and difficult path to Babylon, God was NOT marching them to their death, BUT into His arms! Yes they lost their homes, their temple, their prosperity, and their sovereignty as a nation, BUT through the discipline they gained a deeper and richer relationship with Christ! And Christian, is there anything more important than this? It is commonly asserted that Samuel Rutherford described it this way: “...they lose nothing who gain Christ... [And that is why he also said...] whenever I find myself in the cellar of affliction, I always look around for the wine.”<sup>1</sup> The wine is Christ! He is man’s greatest blessing and reward!

The second grace that God provides us is restoration of and to the land of promise.

Ezekiel 11:17-18, “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “I shall gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I shall give you the land of Israel.”’ When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it.”

The promise here is twofold:

1. The exiles someday would be restored to the Land of Promise.
2. The Land of Promise would be cleansed.

When we consider the first promise, we immediately think of the subsequent three returns of God’s people to Palestine in 538, 458, and 444 BC. It is the second promise that vexes Bible scholars. When was the land cleansed so thoroughly that “...all its detestable things and all its abominations [were removed] from it.” In either redemptive or church history we cannot find a time when “all detestable things and abominations were removed” from the Promised Land. But herein we are benefited greatly by the New Testament commentary on the Old Testament Covenant Promise of the Land. When we study the “land” in the Bible we discover that in the Old Testament it is specifically associated with the promises God gave to His people as it pertained to the “Promised Land.” Yet you also will note that when it comes to the New Testament the “land of promise” is rarely mentioned by name. It turns out, the New Testament speaks much about this promise by utilizing a term used synonymously in the Old Testament for “land”... “inheritance”!

Ephesians 1:18, “*I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.”

1 Peter 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection

of Jesus Christ from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.”

What is this “inheritance” which is spoken about throughout the New Testament? Most of us assume that it is eternal life; YET that falls way short. The “inheritance” spoken about in these passages is nothing less than the Land of Promise referenced throughout the Old Testament!<sup>2</sup>

In apportioning the land when God’s people entered into it under the leadership of Joshua, God said, “But the land shall be divided by lot. They shall receive their inheritance according to the names of the tribes of their fathers” (Numbers 26:55). Here the terms are interchangeable!

Speaking of the remnant, God said, “And they will come together from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers as an inheritance” (Jeremiah 3:18).

In light of this, when we come to Ezekiel 11 where God promises to gather His people into a cleansed and holy “land” we conclude that what ultimately is in mind was NOT the land of Palestine, BUT our “...inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:4); which is exactly how many understood the promise in the Old Testament.

Hebrews 11:13-16a, “All these [the patriarchs] died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out [the language here expands to all of God’s people in the Old Testament], they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is a heavenly one...”

Daniel was disappointed when Cyrus II allowed the Jews to return to Israel and so few went (Daniel 10:1-4)! Now we know perhaps why!... many understood that the Promised Land was NOT Palestine, BUT the New Heavens and Earth!

So, far from being bereft of the Promised Land at this time, the Exiles never left it as the promise ultimately referenced the salvation we have in Christ. So the land that awaits us all is the New Heavens and Earth (the physical land was but a type)! So, the disciplining grace of God did NOT rob the child of God of anything of lasting value that wasn’t paid back ten-fold in Christ! This has and will always be the hope and passion of the genuine servant of God.

Paul had many dark nights of the soul, but this was his comfort:

2 Corinthians 4:16b-18, “...though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are

temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

This brings us to the last grace referenced here, the enjoyment of the many redemptive blessings.

Ezekiel 11:19-20, “And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.”

The promise given here is at the heart of the covenant God made with His people in Abraham: “They will be My people, and I shall be their God” (v. 20b)! This promise, when realized, brought with it many redemptive blessings; three of which are named here.

Ezekiel 11:19a, “And I shall give them ONE HEART.”

This involves unity. Today in the church there is a false unity that is forged around personalities or sentimentality. The Bible is very clear: true unity is brought about as God’s people grow in their ability to confess truth together. Christian maturation occurs as, “we all attain to the unity of the faith” (Ephesians 4:13a). Paul exhorted the very divided church in Corinth thus:

1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Accordingly, tangible unity occurs in a church body when all the members grow in their ability to confess the truth! That is a grace given to us in Christ today!

Ezekiel 11:19b, “A NEW spirit within them.”

The second grace involves the granting of a new spirit. The English translation might make you think of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but that is wrong. The word for “new” here in the LXX is *καίνος* (*kainos*) which speaks of “new of a similar kind” (in contrast to *νέος* [*neos*] which denotes the idea of “new of a different kind.”) As such what is in mind here is NOT the Holy Spirit who already indwells believers at this time (cf. 1 Peter 1:11), BUT the renewal of man’s spirit, and so what we call Regeneration! This is the imparting of new life, the raising up of the deadness of our soul and so making it alive to Christ.<sup>3</sup> Again, this is a grace given to us in Christ today!

Ezekiel 11:19-20a, “...And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, THAT they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them...”

The third grace involves a passion to serve the Lord. Listen to the exhortation Paul gave to Titus:

Titus 2:14, (Christ gave Himself for us) "...that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

That which ultimately led to the demise of the Theocracy in Ezekiel's day was the people's casual approach when it came to the work and service of God. What a comfort to know that a significant part of the new creation involves a desire to serve the Lord! This desire would NOT come from the law or the threat of punishment, BUT from the renewal that comes with regeneration. In Christ, we now all want to obey because we love Him!

Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."

1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

Any Christian who recoils from the law of God (which is another name for the word of God) either is a false Christian or an immature one. Love for God creates a "zealously" for obedience.<sup>4</sup> That is what salvation does to an individual. It transforms us from viewing the law as an enemy (which only destroys) to viewing it as a friend of grace to help us on our way. For again, it gives meat to any and every desire of love for Christ.

So, far from being a people to be pitied, the exiles at this time were a people to be envied. They lost nothing that God did not restore a one hundred- old with Himself! And yet as wonderful as are these graces, do you know where your fallen heart wants to go in response to this message of God's disciplining grace? Our fallen heart wants the security of religion and/or a blind trust in religious clichés.

Ezekiel 11:1-3, "Moreover, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the Lord's house which faced eastward. And behold, *there were* twenty-five men at the entrance of the gate, and among them I saw Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people [once again we are talking about the Elders and so the Shepherds of God's people at this time]. And He said to me, 'Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and give evil advice in this city, who say, "Is not *the time* near to build houses? This *city* is the pot and we are the flesh.'"

It is imperative that you understand that the knowledge Ezekiel had regarding the downfall of Jerusalem had already been proclaimed by many of the prophets whom God sent to His people at this time:

- Nahum in 650 BC.

- Jeremiah in 627 BC.
- Zephaniah in 622 BC.
- Habakkuk at 605 BC.

Each of these prophets sounded the warning that judgment was coming, for Israel was worshipping the Baals! Yet notice the response of the leadership at this time. Their first response was flat-out denial of the truth.

Ezekiel 11:2-3, “And He said to me, ‘Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and give evil advice in this city, who say, “Is not *the time* near to build houses?...”

There is difficulty in translating the Hebrew at this point; this could be a question or a statement- both of which reflect denial on the part of these leaders.

While at first glance, we might commend these men for their faith by which they could live so boldly even though the Babylonians were breathing down their necks, yet we can’t! These leaders had a faith, but it was a blind faith. It was blind to reality, the word of God, and the threat of judgment posed not by the Babylonians, but by the very God who they rejected.

If this is a statement, then it would be understood as a call to battle... a call to arms! Now is NOT the time to build houses, BUT to prepare for war! Yet Jeremiah said that God’s will for them was to surrender, not resist (cf. Jeremiah 38:17-20)!

However you understand the statement, it is clear that the elders flat out denied the word/will of God and so deigned to take matters into their own hands. This is the first response that humans typically give in the face of tragedy. Many cope by denial! And that is how these leaders responded to the multiple, multiple warning from God that judgment was coming!

Will you respond that way? Everyone knows that judgment is coming... yet there are some I fear who continue to respond by writing off the message as religious rhetoric. There are those who think that as long as they don’t think about it, it won’t occur. This is the response predicted of many in the last days:

1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, “For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.”<sup>5</sup>

Listen! Judgment most certainly is coming. Yet understand the grace God gives us this day.

Romans 2:4-6, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every

man according to his deeds.”

The fact that judgment has yet to come is NOT because the message isn't real, BUT because God is giving this generation- and every generation from Christ until now- time to turn from its sin to God! Accordingly, don't waste the time that God has granted you! But go to God and confess your love for Christ and your desire to serve Him!

There is also a second response that the elders gave to the warnings given them by the prophets. Notice secondly, they resorted to a blind trust in religious good-luck charms.

Ezekiel 11:3b, “And He said to me, ‘Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and give evil advice in this city, who say, “Is not *the time* near to build houses? This *city* is the pot and we are the flesh.””

Think of cooking food over an open fire... you've got a beautiful piece of meat-*a filet*- that you want to enjoy on a camping trip. If you took the prized meat, stuck it on a spick, and placed it in the flame, what would happen? The meat would burn before it was adequately cooked. So what should you do? Place the meat in a pan and place the pan over the fire. The effect of the pan would be to protect the meat- in this case, the filet- from being burned.

That is the idea of the proverb referenced here, “This city is the pot and we are the flesh!” In the face of judgment, the elders of Jerusalem essentially said, “*You are wrong prophets! For we know that any army led into battle by the Ark of the Covenant is invincible! Well, that Ark is now in Jerusalem in a temple, designed and inhabited by God. Accordingly, NO fighting force- foreign or domestic- could avail against the city and so hurt us, its inhabitants*”

From this you must see that the second response of the elders, beyond denial, was to appeal to superstition and lucky charms. In their minds, the temple with its ark made Jerusalem inviolable! This is how so many today in the church cope when it comes to an uncertain future; they think that as long as they read the Bible, go to church, give their money, do nice things that they are gaining brownie points — kudos — with God.

You must see that when we do this we actually are rejecting God for religious activity! When it comes to a love relationship with His people, God doesn't care about our religious activity... like any healthy man/woman relationship, He wants

- US
- Our hearts.
- Our love.
- Our devotion.
- Our commitment.
- Our loyalty.

After Saul tried to impress God by offering a large sacrifice which violated God's command, Samuel told him, "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *and* to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). Joel wrote, "'Yet even now,' declares the Lord, 'Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments'" (Joel. 2:12-13a).

Yet that is NOT how the elders of Ezekiel's day responded. Rather, they ignorantly quoted a religious cliché no doubt handed down to them from their fathers, "This city is the pot and we are the flesh!" *God won't allow any hurt to us... we possess His temple!* Sadly, this very response will be the downfall of many on the last day. Speaking of many church-goers in the end times, Christ said this:

Matthew 7:22-23, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' [Notice the focus of their religion... it was their religion and so their religious activity] And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

As we have seen so many times now, what is the ONLY proper response to a Dark Night of the Soul? It is NOT denial or religious activity, BUT a longing for and so an unyielding pursuit of Christ! When David encountered a Dark Night of the Soul, he wrote this:

Psalm 51:16-17, "For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

God is NOT after our religious activity, BUT our hearts! And so when Christ seems far off... when life loses its luster, don't not give up or give in, BUT passionately and vigorously pursue Christ all the more. During a time of great difficulty and trial, the sons of Korah reflected back on the many religious activities in which they engaged in life... all of which had their place, but none of which ought to be the Christian's delight. And this is where their reflection brought them:

Psalm 42:1-2, 11 "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?... Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, [He is] the help of my countenance, and my God."

This is where God wants every exile in Christ to live- longing for and seeking their Lord! Samuel Rutherford put it this way:

You will find in Christianity, that God aims, in all His dealing with His children, to bring them to a high contempt of, and deadly feud with the world, and that we set a high price

upon Christ. God wants us to think that Christ is one who cannot be bought with gold, and he wants us to believe that He is well worth fighting for. And for no other cause does the Lord withdraw from you the childish toys and the earthly delights that He gives to others, but that He may have you wholly for Himself. Therefore, when you are in the furnace, think of the Lord, as of one who comes to woo you in marriage. He seeks His answer of you in affliction, to see if you will say, 'Even so I take Him.' (Rutherford, 1973, p. 70)

## Works Cited

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Rutherford, S. (1973). *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth.

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> This quote is commonly attributed to Samuel Rutherford; for example, Dr. Joel Beeke quotes the line in his book *The Quest For Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*, page 162, and footnotes it as page 52ff of the 1881 edition of the Letter of Samuel Rutherford. For more information on the quote, see <https://virginiahuguenot.blogspot.com/2009/08/cellar-of-affliction.html>

<sup>2</sup> Do a Bible word search of “land AND inheritance” you will note that there are multiple, multiple references where the two words are used synonymously.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Taylor wrote, “There seems to be in this verse a deliberate echo of verse 18 in the repetition of the verb ‘to remove’ or ‘take away’. This is lost in RSV, which has remove in verse 18 and take in verse 19. But Cooke notices it and comments, ‘If the homecoming Jews put away the external obstacles (v. 18), Jahveh will put away the internal.’” (Ezekiel, TOTC, pp. 112-113)

<sup>4</sup> Recall the words Paul used to describe the believers in Macedonia in 2 Cor. 8:1-4, “Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability *they gave* of their own accord, **begging us with much entreaty** for the favor of participation in the support of the saints.” Because of a famine that hit Palestine at this time, Paul commanded the early church to take up a collection to help support the Jerusalem Christians who were suffering quite significantly at this time (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-2). When Paul got to Macedonia, he was blown away by the Christians in this region. Paul’s command was received not as a duty, but as an opportunity to express their love for Christ in a tangible way.

<sup>5</sup> cf., also 2 Peter 3:3-5, 7!